

FACT SHEET



ARMADILLO (*Dasypus novemcinctus*)

Charles W. Ramsey*

The nine-banded armadillo is closely related to armadillos, anteaters and sloths of Central and South America, but it is the only member of that group found in the United States. In 1880, the range of the armadillo was limited to an area south of a line roughly from Corpus Christi west to Eagle Pass. However, since that time they have spread across the state into Oklahoma, Arkansas and eastward through the coastal states to Florida.

This "poor man's hog" likes water and uses small ponds for taking mud baths as well as for drinking. Their rooting activities for food are accompanied frequently by low grunting. When properly prepared, their meat resembles pork.

Description

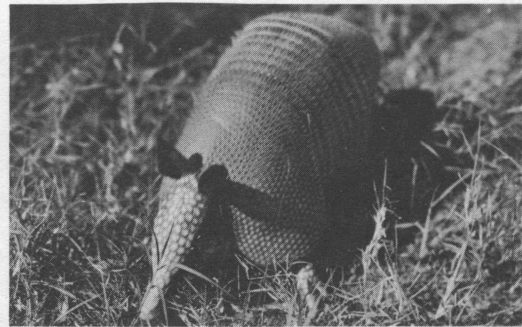
Armadillos, with their natural armor, are unique among mammals. The upper part of the body is encased in a bony "shell." Large brownish shields of bony material cover the shoulders and rump and nine bony bands protect the back and sides in between. Most of their hair is on the soft under parts and is sparse on the shell.

Armadillos are about the size of terrier dogs. They average about 30 inches (760 mm) in total length. Adult males weigh about 12 to 17 pounds (5 to 8 kg), females about 8 to 13 pounds (4 to 6 kg).

The front feet have four toes, the hind feet have five and all are equipped with large, strong claws. The tail is long and tapering, completely covered by bony rings. They have a pungent odor from a pair of glands located close to the anus which is most pronounced when the animal is excited.

Armadillos have no front teeth, only seven or eight molar teeth on each side of the upper and lower jaws. They have a long, protrusible tongue provided

with a sticky mucous secretion to aid in gathering their food. They have large ears and hog-like nose.



Behavior

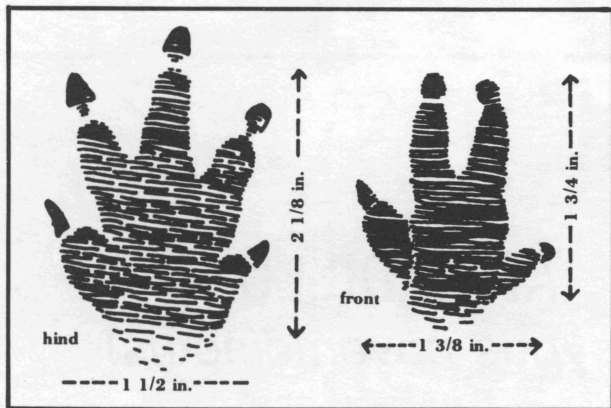
A feeding armadillo is the epitome of industry and perseverance, quite oblivious to the world beyond its immediate vicinity.

Armadillos are active diggers with more dens per individual than almost any other animal their size. They often have many abandoned burrows or burrows used only occasionally as shelters, as well as many occupied burrows. Usually, each occupied burrow is inhabited by only one adult armadillo although other animals such as skunks, opossums, cottontail rabbits, cotton rats and mink have been found living in armadillo dens, some cohabiting with armadillos.

High or low temperatures affect armadillo activity because they lack the protection of a fur coat present in most other mammals. They use their burrows to escape temperature extremes. In summer they are most active in the cool of the evening and at night; but in midwinter, they are active during the warmest part of the day, usually midafternoon. They do not hibernate; therefore, they cannot live where there are long periods of freezing weather.

Armadillos are heavy for their size. They normally ride low in the water when swimming and apparently

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tire easily when forced to swim for any distance. They solve the problem by walking on the bottom, or if the stream is too wide to cross on foot, they ingest air to inflate themselves to make swimming easier.

Natural enemies include coyotes and mountain lions. Dogs can also learn to prey on armadillos. Armadillos can fight with their claws, but when threatened, they usually run to the safety of their burrows or dig rapidly into the ground and anchor themselves with their claws.

Reproduction

Reproduction of the nine-banded armadillo is unique among North American mammals. The breeding season is from September to December. Implantation is delayed for about 3 to 4 months with true gestation taking about 4 months. The young are born in March or April. Litter size is almost always four, and they are always of the same sex. This is caused by *polyembryony* (the production of two or more identical offspring from the division of a single fertilized egg).

At birth young armadillos are fully formed miniatures of their parents. Their eyes are open, and they can walk within a few hours. They stay with their mother several months after being weaned.

Habitat

Armadillos are found in greatest numbers in sandy, loose soils. They obtain their food by probing and scratching for insects and other forms of animal life in the ground, so the texture of the soil during the dry season is extremely important in determining their distribution. In rocky areas such as the Edwards Plateau, armadillos concentrate along streams and den in cracks and crevices in rocky outcroppings. In areas with heavy clay soils, they stay near streams where they can burrow into the banks.

Soil drainage is important to burrowing animals, for in poorly drained soils they may drown in heavy rainfall. Since a high water table also may fill burrows through seepage, armadillos avoid marshy areas.

Dens vary in length from 2 to 15 feet (1 to 5 m) and from a few inches below the surface to a depth of 4 feet (1.3 m). They average 7 to 8 inches (17 to 20 cm) in diameter. Their plan usually is simple with few turns except to avoid such obstacles as roots and rocks. Shallow burrows often serve as food traps for insects and other invertebrates. Burrows used for breeding usually have a large nest chamber 18 inches (45 cm) or more in diameter, containing a nest of dried leaves, grasses and other plants.

Food Habits

The feeding habits of armadillos have given rise to several erroneous ideas. They are called "gravediggers" by some because they were thought to dig into human graves in search of food. They also are thought to feed extensively on quail, chicken and turkey eggs.

Studies of stomach contents of more than 800 armadillos, however, have shown that 93 percent of their food is animal matter comprised mainly of insects and other invertebrates. Most of the insects eaten are larval and adult scarab beetles, which are highly destructive to crops and pastures. Termites, ants and caterpillars also are important parts of their diets, and earthworms, millipedes, centipedes and crayfish are important food items at times. Reptiles and amphibians caught during cold weather make up only a small part of their diets, and birds' eggs were found in only five of 281 stomachs examined.

Most of the small amount of vegetable matter in the diets of armadillos is ingested with other food items. At times armadillos may feed on such fruits as tomatoes and melons, but usually the damage done to these crops is limited. About a third of the vegetation in an armadillo's diet is made up of berries and fungi.

Armadillos eat carrion readily when it is available. Animal carcasses frequently are visited for both carrion and for the maggots and pupae of flies found on or near them.

The armadillo's digging activities may bring them in conflict with man, particularly during the dry part of midsummer when the animals are attracted to watered gardens and lawns. Most of the digging, however, is beneficial to the soil, and their feeding activities on insects are helpful. This animal serves an interesting, useful role in Texas fauna.

References

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